



WORDS ELISABETH KING

HOT HOTELS A COOL ATTRACTION IN FLORENCE'S FASHION DISTRICT

FOR the past decade or so, Ferragamo's plush grouping of boutique hotels in the luxury fashion house's home base of Florence have been as hot a ticket as its fabled shoes and handbags. The Florentine shoemaker, who counted Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn as fans, established a foothold in the hospitality business in 1995 and its toney villas, city hotels, apartments and even luxury yachts are collectively known as the Lungarno Collection (lungarnocollection.com). There are stunning properties in Rome and rural Tuscany but the group's distinctive personality shines brightest in Florence, where founder Salvatore Ferragamo set up shop following a star-studded career in Hollywood during the 1920s and '30s.

I use the term personality because there are no Ferragamo signs at any of the hotels.

Hand-crafted models once worn by Rita Hayworth, Ava Gardner and Ingrid Bergman are star attractions.

The connection is subtle and the company's main aim was to show that it is just as good a hotelier as it is crafting hand-made shoes. Opening a hotel that doubles as an art gallery takes a lot of chutzpah in Florence but that's the theme behind the Gallery Hotel Art. Located in a small street on a tiny piazza only a stone's throw from the River Arno, you don't get a classic room with a view but you do get an overload of Italian chic. Cool without being cold, wild boar leather bedheads set off the Frette sheet-covered beds and the Japanese-inspired Fusion Bar and Restaurant routinely serves prosecco with the sushi and tempura. There's also an extensive cocktail list, including the expertly-made Lychee Collins and Straw Pepper Martini.

Wine lovers might prefer to stay at the Hotel Lungarno, whose Borgo San Jacopo restaurant is among the best in Florence. The huge wine list showcases more than 500 labels and the views of the Ponte Vecchio are achingly beautiful. The executive chef is Beatrice Segoni, who is as

famous for changing her hair colour as she is for her ever-evolving seasonal menus. When Bill Clinton came to Florence in the late '90s, Segoni was working at a Michelin two-star restaurant in Umbria which was chosen to orchestrate the menu for a presidential dinner at the Palazzo Vecchio. She was introduced to the Ferragamo family on that fateful night and has been the chef at Borgo San Jacopo since day one.

In 2011, the restaurant received a five-star diamond award from the American Academy of Hospitality Sciences, one of only 14 in the world to be granted the honour. Segoni was praised for the restaurant's collection of wines from boutique vineyards and signature dishes such as rabbit with basil escalibada and medley of fried squid, shrimp, scampi, zucchini, potatoes and

carrots. Whatever is on the menu, be sure to request a table on the tiny terrace which offers a few tables overlooking the Arno.

The Hotel Continentale, with its photo-op views of the Ponte Vecchio, is a hit with the fashion crowd and anyone keen on experiencing the rooftop bar - the Sky Lounge - with its 360-degree views of the Florentine skyline. Sipping a Negroni here borders on a movie fantasy. The pink and orange acrylic bar downstairs serves really good dry martinis. After a day of wandering through the Uffizi Gallery, the Duomo and Santa Croce, the hotel's White Iris Spa offers a two-hour foot treatment to relieve aching soles.

A former 14th century defence tower, the Continentale underwent a complete transformation under the direction of famed Italian architect, Michele Bonan. There's a '50s and '60s vibe to reference the heyday of Italian film, haute couture and real luxe. On the second floor is the "relaxation room", a public reception area which offers gorgeous views of the Uffizi from five Bonan-designed chaises

longues. The icing on the cake? The top floor, formerly the bell tower, is filled with a single 170 square metre suite with panoramic views over the surrounding Tuscan countryside.

The Ferragamo family owns a spectacular vineyard estate - Il Borro - which is available to rent on request. But all of its hotels offer personalised wine tours by private car of the Chianti, Montepulciano, Brunello di Montalcino and Antinori vineyards.

Don't miss the Museo Ferragamo, a mecca for shoe lovers. Located in the 13th century Palazzo Spini Feroni, it contains a huge display culled from the company's 10,000-strong shoe archive. Hand-crafted models once worn by Rita Hayworth, Ava Gardner and Ingrid Bergman are star attractions.

And so is Pane e Vino, one of the first dedicated wine bars in Florence. A 10-minute stroll from the Ponte Vecchio, the barn-style interior features exposed beams, skylights and a live video stream so that you can watch the chefs at work. Tuscan specialities such as fried zucchini flowers and ravioli with pear and pecorino are highlights of the menu. Co-owner Gilberto Pierazzuoli is a local wine expert and he's more than happy to pair each dish with selections from the 250-label Italian wine list.

More than 400 wines, including Masseto, Italy's gold standard merlot, lure tourists and locals to Q.B Quantobasto, another bistro-cum-wine bar carved out of an industrial space. Only a few minutes walk from the Duomo, lunch here is unforgettably atmospheric. And so is dinner, with popular listings such as tagliatelle with pigeon and wild fennel and rosemary lasagna.

Silvio Ursini, the owner of the Obika mozzarella bars in Rome and Florence, is the man behind Osteria Tornabuoni. Tucked inside the 16th century Palazzo Tornabuoni, you can also trawl through the gastronomia (food store) and enoteca (wine shop and tasting room). The ribollita - Tuscan bread soup - is a must and so is the marinated wild boar fillet in season. Both of which live up to the restaurant's promise of serving "the soul of Tuscany on a plate".